

The Builder.

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THE degree of exactness to be looked for in what are called "Architects' Estimates," is a question involving several considerations, and which leads often to much difficulty. The same ignorance touching the architects' functions and position, to which we have often alluded in other matters, has on the one hand, brought most unjust obloquy on the profession, in respect of the inaccuracy of their estimates, and on the other, has led individual members of it to practice deception and act systematic falsehoods for their own advancement. An actual occurrence affords a more popular means of illustrating errors and evolving views than abstract reasoning, and we will, therefore, put before our readers the particulars of what followed a competition of designs a short time since. Our attention has been called to this particular competition several times by parties interested in it, but circumstances have led us to avoid referring to it till now.

In April last, the governors of the Pawn-brokers' Charitable Institution, invited architects, through our pages, to submit designs for a set of almshouses. They stipulated with the architects who applied for particulars, that the building was not to cost more than 1,500*l.* to 2,000*l.*, and that the author of the most approved design, if not employed to superintend the building, should be content to receive the sum of twenty pounds for his drawings. Thirty-two designs were sent in, and at a meeting on the 6th of May, one of them was selected by ballot as the most approved, and found to be by Messrs. Elmslie and Lee. Two others were then balloted for, as next in merit, and to the authors of these, Mr. Woodman and Mr. Cooper, the sum of ten guineas each was awarded.*

At the meeting it was said that the first-named architects had stated that if their design was accepted, they were prepared to introduce builders who would carry it out for the sum stipulated, namely, 2,000*l.* It was accordingly moved and carried unanimously, that they should be employed to superintend the building, provided they obtained a tender to execute it for the sum named, from parties who should be approved of by the committee.

A sub-committee was afterwards appointed to make the necessary arrangements with the architects, and their first act was to inquire of the latter whether they would charge for the working drawings and specification required to estimate from, in the event of the lowest tender exceeding the amount prescribed, and the consequent abandonment of the plan?—and if so, how much? After some correspondence, the architects proposed, in that event, to charge thirty guineas for the working drawings, to which the general committee raised no objection. Ultimately, however, on being further pressed by the sub-committee, the architects agreed by letter that "if no tender were obtained to the approval of the com-

mittee," they would "not make any charge for their services."

Five builders were selected, and it was arranged that the quantities should be taken out by one surveyor; that the builder making the lowest tender, below 2,000*l.*, should execute the work, and pay for the quantities; but that if the lowest tender exceeded that sum, and the works were not done, the committee should pay for the quantities.

Four of the builders sent in tenders, namely, Messrs. Grimsdell, Cubitt, l'Anson, and Curtis;—the highest was 4,200*l.*, and the lowest, Messrs. Curtis, 3,794*l.* (including fence walls and cellars = 700*l.*).

The cost of taking out the quantities,—mark this, good Mr. Committeemen of all classes,—was seventy-three pounds: a fair and ordinary charge.

At a meeting on the 16th of November, when the foregoing particulars were made known, and the sub-committee wished to know how they were to act, much difference of opinion was expressed. One member thought the contract should have been put to public competition, because he had known a case where tenders being called for, the highest was 6,000*l.*, and the lowest 4,000*l.*, and he was able to state that the builder who executed it for the lower sum had paid himself well by the transaction. Another clenched this by referring to the tenders sent in for a certain Town-hall, whereof the lowest was exactly half the amount of the highest.

Some thought they ought to strive to get more money, and carry out the plan, as it was generally liked; some, that it should be reduced in size to meet the funds in hand; but another (Mr. Kelday), taking the right view of the case, in one aspect, pointed out that it would be most unfair to the other competitors to accept these plans with the information then before them. They might be the best submitted, but if the other competitors had allowed themselves the same latitude in regard of expense, they would doubtless have sent in designs of a higher character: they had sent in plain designs, not perhaps from deficiency of talent, but in order to keep within the specified outlay. He did not think it right, therefore, that the advantage should be given to those who said they could produce a builder to execute the building for a certain sum, and then drew back from that agreement. The truth of this was felt, and the matter was adjourned for consideration.

On the 26th November the committee met again, and a vote of censure on the architects being proposed, a long discussion ensued. One member remarked that this practice of saying a building could be executed for a sum much smaller than was really the case, was very commonly adopted by architects upon similar occasions. Some were anxious to keep the drawings, but employ other architects to carry them out. A few were for a fresh competition and another selection, but the expense of taking out the quantities again was an obstacle to that course.

Yes; twenty or thirty architects might have been allowed to make designs, to spend long hours putting on paper the result of years of expensive study, without compunction: a twenty pound note, or nothing, as the case might be, would have got rid of the successful candidate if not needed after all. But to take out the quantities, to estimate what the creation of the architect's intelligence, not to say art, would cost in fulfilling, could not be done without outlay of money, therefore the fresh

competition was to be avoided. The same consideration, too, prevented application to the authors of the second and third selected designs.

A very praiseworthy anxiety was manifested that the building they were about to erect should be creditable to them: more than one speaker admitted that they were of course aware when they selected number one, that it could not be carried out for the money named, but then they were justified in depending on the architect's statement.

Mr. Kelday, however, stuck to his motion: they had started at the outset, he said, by propounding certain conditions to men of talent, members of a liberal profession, and it was not just to those (he few or many), who had attended to these conditions, to select the work of one who had so far exceeded the limits of expense. Ultimately the vote of censure was passed, the fact that nothing was to be paid to the architects duly recognised, and a sub-committee appointed to obtain plans from one or more architects, with the significant remark that next time the architect himself should be made to pay the expense of taking out the quantities, in the event of the lowest tender exceeding the amount of his estimate.

All this is exceedingly instructive; and what it teaches is so plain as scarcely to need a comment.

Ought we to blame the committee for their rejection of the selected design? Certainly not. We should otherwise stultify all our denunciations of committees on other occasions, who, prescribing a certain sum, have selected designs which obviously could not be executed for it, and so acted most unjustly to the honest or better-informed competitors. Committees, by constantly determining in this way, have led many architects to consider that it is of no use stating honestly the sum they believe the due execution of their design would cost,—that their only chance of success in a competition lies in the practice of a deception. That competition committees have themselves brought about this melancholy state of things, is, however, no defence for those who so conduct themselves.

But there is another aspect under which architects' estimates must be viewed,—and that is, as we said at starting, the degree of correctness which should in justice be expected in them. An architect's estimate, for which, by the way, no one ever contemplates paying him, should, in justice, be regarded only as an approximation. To be very far from wrong in a *bona fide* estimate, shows a want of a certain kind of knowledge which an architect ought to possess, but to expect that he shall, without adequate remuneration, go through a tedious and lengthened process of calculation, or pay the large sum which he must pay if he employ another to do it for him, is manifestly wrong. In the case before us, it was seen that the process which was considered necessary to enable the builders to arrive at an exact estimate,* cost more than 70*l.*, and no one questioned the correctness of this charge. The sum which the successful architect was to receive, if not employed, was 20*l.*! Even if employed, the commission would have been but 100*l.*—for design, speci-

* The differences between builders found, in many cases, even after this calculation, are, our readers know, sufficiently strange. The following list of tenders for six villas, near Fleetpond, Hants, forwarded by a correspondent a few days since, affords a pretty specimen of careful estimating:—

Bogall, Guildford.....	1,375
Smith, Guildford.....	1,375
Fishers and Lee.....	1,500
Hall and Sons, London.....	1,025
White, Harley-row.....	1,750
Charlton, Harley-row.....	1,945

* We mentioned the award at the time (p. 275, vol. v.) with the remark, that we had received various complaints against the decision, but avoided insertion of them as we had not seen the plans.